DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 355 CG 031 984

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TITLE	Bereavement Management and Counseling at the University Level. ERIC/CASS Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CG-02-01
PUB DATE	2002-09-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0014
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Counseling and Student Services Clearinghouse, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 201 Ferguson Building, P.O. Box 26171, Greensboro, NC 27402-6171. Tel: 336-334-4114; Tel: 800-414-9769 (Toll Free); Fax: 336-334-4116; e-mail: ericcass@uncg.edu. For full text: http://ericcass.uncg.edu.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Bereavement; *College Environment; *Counseling; Counseling Techniques; Death; Grief; Higher Education; *Institutional Role; *Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *Grief Counseling

ABSTRACT

This digest addresses two aspects of managing bereavement on campus: 1) the need for effective counseling practices to help students manage grief, whether due to a death on campus or due to the death of a loved one, and 2) the need for institutional procedures to respond to the death of a campus community member. Administrators and faculty in institutions of higher education are often unaware of special considerations important to both the counseling needed by those who are bereaved, and the management of a campus death. Student issues focus on where one can go on campus for support, how to handle new and unsettling feelings, how to approach professors and others for understanding, and how to deal with an environment that has suddenly changed due to implications of the death. The institution must appoint a contact person to manage information from within and outside of the institution. Suggested procedures and special considerations in counseling the bereaved are mentioned. (GCP)

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Bereavement Management and Counseling at the University Level

ERIC/CASS Digest

By

Robert L. Wrenn

September, 2002 EDO-CG-02-01

ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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ERIC CASS DIGEST

Bereavement Management and Counseling at the University Level

Robert L. Wrenn

September, 2002
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Overview

This Digest addresses two aspects of managing bereavement on campus: 1) the need for effective counseling practices to help students manage grief, whether due to a death on campus or due to the death of a loved one, and 2) the need for institutional procedures to respond to the death of a campus community member. Universities and colleges are not usually prepared for what to do in the event of the death of a student, faculty, staff or administrator. While some schools do have a plan of action as to how to proceed, this plan is often based upon an unclear understanding of how a death affects those most at risk, and a poor understanding of the implications for institutional public relations. Even institutions that do provide a written plan may not have staff available who understand the special issues that pertain to the management of bereavement or how bereavement counseling differs from other kinds of counseling (Wrenn, 1991a). During the past 30 years a great deal of research about the specific issues that facilitate grief and bereavement recovery has been generated and published (Bowlby, 1973-1982; Parks & Weiss, 1983; Zinner, 1985). This information is useful to those in positions of leadership whether or not trained counselors are available to facilitate the healing process.

Helping Students Manage Grief

One of the primary concerns of bereaved students is where to go on campus for support and information when a death occurs (Wrenn, 1999). Campus administrators need to be aware that students may not seek out help from available sources for various reasons. For example, although students often regard the counseling or mental health service on campus as a place to go for serious psychological problems, they seldom consider using these services to talk about their grief over a death. Students might not turn to parents due to their need to become independent from those they see as past authorities. Students are often hesitant or embarrassed to seek out friends for fear of burdening them with this intense emotion. Finally, while campus ministry is sometimes sought out, many students are not engaged in communities of faith (Wrenn, 1999).

A second issue for students is what has been described as the third task of mourning, dealing with a changed environment (Worden, 1991). Students who return to campus after missing classes due to a death often find it difficult to explain to peers and faculty why they have been absent. Other members of the university community also have difficulty knowing what to say to someone who has experienced the painful death of a family member or friend. Students may thus feel alienated as they reintegrate into campus life. It is common for students to feel that no one understands their situation.

A third issue for grieving students is not knowing how to convince a skeptical professor that extra time is needed to make up late work, a missed exam, or to complete a dropped class. Helping students address this problem requires not only individual counseling for the student, but also an institutional policy that provides faculty with clear guidelines on how flexible they can and should be in helping students complete their coursework.

Further, there are common themes in bereaved students', and other campus members', recovery process (Wrenn, 1999). First, students want to know that they are dealing with the death normally. A counselor trained in the stages of grieving can provide reassurances and assistance as the student processes the death. One of the first symptoms a counselor will note is the "if only," phenomenon. "If only I had done this or known that, things would have been different." One simple tool that can help students logically realize that they could not have second-guessed the death is to draw a diagram as follows:

I----------*Death Occurs*----------I

The dashes before the words *Death Occurs* represent situational and emotional information the student had prior to the death. The dashes after the words *Death Occurs* represent information the student did *not* have prior to the death. The counselor can help students reason that they could not have behaved differently with the facts available to them at the time of the death. This tool helps students visually recognize that they need not burden themselves additionally with fallacious reasoning such as, "I *should have* known this or *could have* done that before the death of my loved one."

Students also need to know that they don't have to put aside their own grief to fix someone else's. In particular, students want to know how to deliver the bad news about their loved one, or the beloved campus member, to others without making the situation more difficult for themselves. Conversely, students also want to know how to respect the feelings of the person(s) they must inform of the death. Following are some guidelines that can the counselor can use to help students deal with this problem. This list is also useful to a campus representative in the case of a death that affects the campus community as a whole.

- Decide who is the best person to deliver the news.
- Gather as many facts as possible about the death before informing the person(s) affected by it.
- Notify affected parties in person if at all possible.
- Find a comfortable setting to deliver the news.
- Use a two-part statement including how you feel about having to deliver the news, such as, "I am really sorry to have to tell you that [your loved one] died in a traffic accident this morning."
- Then, say no more. Wait for a response. The person being informed *may* begin to take control over the situation and needs the opportunity to do so.
- Answer questions to the fullest extent possible.
- Ask if they would like to call, or have you call, someone to be with them.
- Stay with them until help arrives.
- Write down how they can reach you if they so desire.

• Follow up later that day or the next day to see how they are doing.

• Understand that each situation is different and you can do no harm if you are honest and stick to what you know and feel.

• Debrief with someone you (the counselor) trust if you are unsettled by this event.

Institutional Procedures in Response to a Campus Death

There are a number of actions the institution can and should take when a death has occurred (Wrenn, 1999). The first step is to appoint someone to manage the media, to inform the personnel who can intervene with those close to the person who died, and to inform faculty and others in a sensitive way. A more complete list of procedures considered to be important by those most involved is:

• Announce arrangements for students, faculty, staff and officials from the institution to attend the funeral or memorial service.

• Prepare letters of recognition, appreciation or achievement to be given to the family or loved ones of the deceased.

• Obtain the support of the president, vice-president, dean, department head and faculty familiar with the student, or campus member, to convey to the family and friends that the student, or campus member, was important to the college.

• Establish open channels of communication between police and campus personnel.

• Arrange for professional counselors to be available to work with roommates, friends, and family of the deceased.

• Provide a place and time for students and others to ask questions and express sorrow, concern or anger.

• Follow up with those most affected by the death.

• Publicly acknowledge the death, e.g., through mailings to those most concerned, or campus news announcements.

• Encourage those closest to the deceased to be involved in services and other events (Wrenn, 1994).

The annual number of expected deaths per 10,000 student enrollments is about 4.5. Even though a university with an enrollment of 30,000 students will normally have 10-20 student deaths a year, and possibly several faculty and staff deaths, the basic assumption by most is that a single death could or should have been prevented (Wrenn, 1991b). Given these statistics, it is imperative that institutions of all sizes be prepared to deal with the fact that deaths *will* occur and bereavement issues need to be addressed.

Further Counseling Considerations

Once the initial shock and emotional outpouring of a sudden death have been experienced, students may turn to professional counselors for continuing support in the grieving process. Some counseling considerations that are important in working with people who have experienced a recent death are:

• Acknowledging difficulties in dealing with a changed environment and set of circumstances due to the death.

• Helping the student or other campus member to identify feelings and thoughts about the deceased.

• Providing time to grieve.

• Interpreting what is normal in the grieving process.

• Acknowledging and supporting individual differences in grieving styles.

• Encouraging physical exercise, meditation, or yoga activities that are comfortable to the student.

• Offering continued support.

• Examining defenses and coping styles in the healing process.

• Identifying pathology and making referrals if necessary

Summary

Administrators and faculty in institutions of higher education are often unaware of special considerations important to both the counseling needed by those who are bereaved, either as a result of the campus death or the death of a loved one, and the management of a campus death. Student issues focus on where one can go on campus for support, how to handle new and unsettling feelings, how to approach professors and others for understanding, and how to deal with an environment that has suddenly changed due to implications of the death. Assurances should be offered as to what is normal in this situation (i.e., normal mourning experiences), how to handle guilt, anger and sorrow, and how to talk with others about the bad news of a death. The institution must appoint a contact person to manage information from within and outside of the institution. Suggested procedures and special considerations in counseling the bereaved have been mentioned. References for further information are included at the end of this article.

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